

Single Use Materials

Cass-Clay Community Snapshot

May 2019

Introduction

About 40 percent of all plastic produced is used in packaging and most of this packaging has been designed to be used only once.¹ Most of it ends up in our landfills, littered on the ground, or in our waterways. It can even break down into tiny pieces called microplastics and make its way into the soil or the stomachs of wildlife. Much of this plastic packaging is not biodegradable and will remain in the environment for hundreds of years.

With increasing consumer awareness of the downsides of single use plastics and other packaging material like polystyrene foam (commonly referred to by the brand name “Styrofoam”), has caused companies, governments, and individuals to take action to reduce these **single use materials**.

Various types of packaging exist, but this community snapshot will focus on those used to serve food and beverages. Restaurants, coffee shops, grocery stores, and other retailers in the Fargo-Moorhead area have initiated changes to reduce single use materials, but there are further actions the community can take to reduce our dependence on these materials and the effect they have on our environment.

Initiatives in Cass-Clay Addressing Single Use Materials

Community Education

F-M Plastic Bag Task Force: This task force, initiated by Clay County, is a nonprofit organization focused on educating the public on plastic consumption and how to recycle different types of plastic. It implemented the Boomerang Bag Program which provides free reusable bags at stores where there are plastic bag recycling drop-offs. They have launched “A Day Without a Bag” campaign to start a conversation about plastic bag usage where individuals can recycle their plastic bags at specific grocery stores in exchange for a reusable bag. In February 2019, the task force challenged fifth graders in the area to collect plastic bags to recycle.

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<https://www.facebook.com/ClayCoPlasticBagTaskForce/>

MinnKota EnviroServices: This local recycling center services commercial recycling pick-ups in the Fargo-Moorhead area and is the drop-off point for Fargo-Moorhead’s residential services. In 2017, the company switched to no-sort recycling, with all types of household or commercial recycling collected in one bin, which caused a threefold increase in recycling usage. MinnKota actively promotes recycling awareness projects such as Earth Day, Arbor Day, and America Recycles Day, tours of the MinnKota Recycling facility are available by appointment, and a MinnKota representative is available for schools or community organization presentations pertaining to the recycling industry and its benefits. Their representatives have spoken at the Chamber of Commerce, civic organizations, and provided direct training for businesses, to name a few.

<https://www.minnkotarecycling.com/recycling>

¹ National Geographic. Howard B, et al. A running list of action on plastic pollution (online). Published 2019 January 17.
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2018/07/ocean-plastic-pollution-solutions/>

River Keepers: Years ago, their staff noticed bags getting caught in trees along the river, so a board member started the T-shirt to Tote Project, where volunteers make grocery tote bags out of gently used or new t-shirts that have been donated. Shoppers go home with hundreds of these bags each year at grocery stores near downtown Fargo, such as Prairie Roots Food Co-op, Swanson Health Products and Tochi Products, and at local events that River Keepers attends, like Midwest Kid Fest and the Fargo Police community picnic. To learn more about volunteering or making tote bags, email kimberly@riverkeepers.org or visit their website at <https://www.riverkeepers.org/volunteer/>

Food Retailers

Coffee Shops: Many coffee shops in the area provide a discount to customers who bring in their reusable coffee cups instead of taking disposable to-go cups, or conversely upcharge those who *do not* bring in a reusable cup. Disposable coffee cups are not recyclable due to the thin layer of plastic inside the cardboard cup that keeps the cup waterproof.

Convenience Stores: Many gas stations in the area, like Holiday Stationstores, will charge a lower price for coffee if a customer brings in their own travel mug.

Flannel Fizz: This local soda company has been selling its sodas at the Red River Market, the farmers market in downtown Fargo, and plans on expanding to selling to breweries in the future. They aim to be a zero waste business, so they serve their sodas in refillable growlers and provide a significant discount to customers who return their growlers to refill. Customers have embraced the company's waste reducing practices, and they have averaged a growler return rate of 65-70%.

Grocery Retailers: Most grocery stores contain shelves upon shelves of single use packaging, delis with to-go containers, and plastic bags at check-out.

- In Fargo, plastic shopping bags are accepted for recycling* at Cashwise Foods, Walmart, Hornbacher's, Family Fare, and Lowe's Home Improvement.
- In Moorhead, Cashwise Foods, Family Fare, Hornbacher's, Lowe's Home Improvement, Target, and Walmart accept plastic bags for recycling.*
- Many grocery stores offer shoppers an incentive for bringing in reusable bags, such as Hornbachers, which offers a 5-cent discount for every bag a shopper brings to use at checkout.
- *Prairie Roots Food Co-op:* this local food cooperative has recently gone bagless! They provide t-shirt totes from River Keepers and empty product boxes for customers who do not have reusable bags at checkout. Their deli has recyclable to-go containers as well as washable plates, glasses, and silverware for customers eating in their community room. They encourage customers to bring in their own containers to fill at their bulk section and offer small glass mason jars and spice jars for purchase. The store recently introduced a "Take a Jar, Leave a Jar" station in their Bulk Department where shoppers can drop off jars for others to use after being cleaned and sanitized by staff.
- *Natural Grocers:* this natural foods store in Fargo provides empty product boxes for customers at check-out - no plastic bags.

*See section below called *What can I do?* for a list of additional plastic packaging materials that can be recycled at these grocery retailers and businesses

Governments and Nonprofits

North Dakota: In March 2019, the State Legislature passed a bill (HB 1200) which the governor signed into law that placed a ban on the ban of certain plastics. It restricts cities and counties from, among other measures, banning plastic straws and banning or taxing plastic bags. The bill was introduced by a Minot lawmaker who owns waste-hauling and landfill businesses, and proponents of the bill want to stop a “potential patchwork of regulations across the state and undue burden on businesses.” The city of Minot was considering a 5-cent plastic bag tax which they will no longer be able to implement. Opponents of the bill would rather have the issue remain under local control and not be regulated at the state level. (*Note: this is the only instance in this Community Snapshot that would not reduce the use of single use materials.*)

<https://www.grandforksherald.com/news/government-and-politics/4587521-paper-or-plastic-north-dakota-senate-says-cities-cant-ban>

<https://www.kfyrtv.com/content/news/Senate-votes-to-ban-cities-from-banning-or-taxing-plastic-bags-straws-507426351.html>

<https://www.valleynewslive.com/content/news/Bill-prohibits-communities-from-restricting-plastic-bag-use-507454801.html>

Red River Market: This farmers market in downtown Fargo strives to be a landfill-free event where nothing enters the landfill. All disposable materials must be compostable or recyclable. With an estimated attendance of more than 7,000 people per Saturday throughout the summer, this event has an impact on that day's landfill contents. They also have booths to educate consumers on how to recycle materials.

The event lacks enough composting space for all its disposable materials, so some of it ends up in the landfill. A municipal composting site would fill this gap for the farmers market.

www.redriver.market

Businesses and Schools

Blackbird Pizza: The owner's daughter noticed the number of plastic straws that get thrown away, which led this restaurant in downtown Fargo to provide straws to customers only if they request one. Further, they started using reusable plastic lids in the kitchen instead of disposable plastic wrap.

<https://www.kvrr.com/2018/03/22/plastic-straws-plastic-bags/>

Concordia College: This Moorhead university's Dining Services has single use materials in mind when creating policies. They have a “Green-to-Go” program where students can pay a refundable \$5 deposit to their dining hall and receive a card that can be traded for a to-go container. When the dirty container is returned, the dining hall will take it back to wash it and the student receives their card back in exchange. Students can get their \$5 back if they want to stop participating in the program.

The dining hall also has EcoTensil tasting spoons instead of small plastic spoons to reduce plastic waste.

<https://www.concordiacollege.edu/student-life/dining-services/sustainability-in-dining/>

Essentia Health: This area hospital experiences 1,000 transactions per day in its cafeteria along with 300-400 room service orders. Their new dining services manager has already begun reducing their polystyrene foam use by transitioning to plastic cups in their dining area as well as selling reusable mugs. This has reduced costs and disposable cup usage. They are looking for more ways to reduce their single use materials and would welcome the addition of a compost facility to accommodate compostable materials.

<https://www.essentiahealth.org/>

Granite City Food and Brewery: This Fargo restaurant is trying to get rid of plastic straws completely and transition to paper straws.

<https://www.gcfb.com/location/fargo-north-dakota/>

Healthy Food Ingredients: this Fargo company that sells specialty ingredient brands internationally has a mission to be stewards of the land, and this affects how they think of using single use materials in packaging. A large portion of their business is “bulk” business, meaning they package or sell products in bulk hopper, totes or 50 pound bags. By shipping bulk, they use much less packaging material. They recently added compactors at two facilities and are able to bale totes and cardboard to ship by the truckload to recycling. They also have recently switched the workers’ disposable gloves at their Valley City processing facility to the biodegradable version.

<https://www.hfifamily.com/our-stewardship/sustainability/>

HoDo Restaurant and HoDo Lounge: This Fargo eatery has tabletop signs stating “Plastic Straws Available Upon Request” and lists the following facts about plastic straw usage:

Each day we use 500,000,000 straws. Enough straws to fill 46,400 large school buses per year! Straws are among the TOP 10 marine debris items. A massive island of garbage over two times the size of the state of Texas is floating in the Pacific Ocean. Plastic constitutes 90% of all trash floating in the world’s oceans. Check out these websites to educate yourself more on this topic: StrawlessOcean.org / BeStrawFree.org / OneLessStraw.org

<https://www.hoteldonaldson.com/>

Microsoft: Their local campus’ dining center made the decision to have no straws on campus and all their cups and to-go containers are compostable. Similar to the Red River Market (see above), a municipal or commercial composting site would aid in keeping these compostable materials out of the landfill.

Minnesota State University Moorhead (MSUM): This university has a similar Dining Services program to Concordia College (see above). The Green Box Program allows students to purchase a to-go container that can be returned to be washed by Dining Services and students take a clean to-go container in return.

<https://www.mnstate.edu/student-life/dining/>

Nichole’s Fine Pastry: This bakery near downtown Fargo has moved to using paper bags for carry out orders instead of plastic bags.

<https://www.nicholesfinepastry.com/>

Sanford Health: One and a half years ago, the hospital’s two largest medical centers moved to compostable to-go containers. These two campuses use no polystyrene foam. The South University campus is upgrading its dining services and will move to these products as well. Additionally, staff members have put up signs in a few dining areas asking customers to refrain from plastic straw use.

<https://www.sanfordhealth.org/>

US Foods: This national foodservice distributor has made a commitment to sustainability with their Serve Good program. Two initiatives within the program, Responsible Disposables and Packaging Standards, focus on responsible sourcing of packaging materials along with waste reduction. Their line of Responsible Disposables contains a minimum of 35% post-consumer content along with other compostable and renewable materials. For example, they offer clients a plant-based straw that composts in 90 days and a fiber-flax towel. To learn more, visit their website: <https://www.usfoods.com/why-us-foods/serve-good.html>

Community Actions

- Local governments can:
 - Create policies for their jurisdictions that limit single use materials at city or county functions.
 - Push for a local municipal or commercial composting site so biodegradable materials can be composted locally. Without a composting site, these materials end up in the landfill since they cannot be recycled. (*Note: **compostable plastics** are only compostable in commercial high heat facilities while unbleached plant fiber, bamboo, and wood materials are compostable without the high heat.*)
 - Provide resources to consumers and businesses on how to reduce their single use materials. This serves the local governments by reducing the load on local landfills and recycling services.
 - Provide consumers with additional recycling education to lessen recycling contamination.
 - Assist local businesses to start as a waste-free, low-waste business or work with existing businesses to move toward that goal. Working with the Chamber of Commerce or the Small Business Association might help in growing such programs.
 - Provide incentives for businesses to reduce these materials or ban certain single use materials (like a plastic bag or a plastic straw ban).
 - Recognize businesses for their voluntary efforts to reduce single use materials.
- Businesses can educate consumers about single use materials or create financial incentives for reductions, like reducing grocery bills when consumers bring reusable bags or charging less for a cup of coffee in a reusable cup
- Food retailers can request large providers like Sodexo, Sam's Club, or Costco carry containers and to-go packaging that is recyclable or biodegradable

What can I do?

- Eliminate plastic straws. Decline straws at restaurants and purchase a washable metal or silicone straw for home if you cannot do without
- Bring your own reusable to-go containers when eating out
- Encourage your favorite restaurants to ditch the polystyrene foam and move to recyclable plastic or washable materials
- Use reusable produce bags and shopping bags at the grocery store
- Buy from bulk bins whenever possible and bring in your own containers to fill
- Reduce your purchases of convenience foods that are wrapped in plastic
- Buy meat and cheese from the deli and have them wrapped in paper
- Carry a reusable water bottle wherever you go so you can avoid using plastic water bottles
- Purchase drinks in glass bottles instead of plastic
- Pack your lunch or leftovers in reusable wrappers made of beeswax or cloth
- Bring washable silverware in your lunch to work or school to cut down on plasticware
- Recycle as much plastic packaging material as possible. Acceptable items you can drop off at grocery retailer recycling locations (see above)::
 - Carryout bags / plastic shopping bags, produce bags, bread bags, product overwrap, shrink wrap
 - Dry cleaning bags, case wrap, air pillows, newspaper bags, bubble wrap
 - Any #4 plastic film or packaging

Resources

Cass County Plastics Recycling <http://fargond.gov/city-government/departments/solid-waste/residential-recycling/plastic-bags-other-items>

Clay County Plastics Recycling
<https://claycountymn.gov/1457/Plastic-Bags-Film-Packaging>

Single Use Plastics - A roadmap to sustainability (UN Environment Program 2018)
https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/25496/singleUsePlastic_sustainability.pdf

World Centric - Biocompostables
<http://www.worldcentric.org/biocompostables/bioplastics>

For more information, please contact Kim Lipetzky with the Fargo Cass Public Health Office at 701-241-8195 or klipetzky@fargond.gov